On Intellectual Dishonesty

Dishonesty has two parts: 1) saying something that is untrue, and 2) saying it with the intent to mislead the other person. You can have each without the other: you can be genuinely mistaken and thereby say something false without intending to mislead, and you can intentionally mislead someone without ever saying anything that's untrue. (The second is generally considered deceit, but not dishonesty.)

However, you can be intellectually dishonest without doing *either* of these things. Imagine that you're conducting an experiment and most of the time it comes out exactly the way you expect but one time it goes wrong (you probably just screwed up the measurements). Telling someone about your work, you say: "Oh, it works just the way I expected — seven times it came out exactly right."

This isn't untrue and it isn't intentionally misleading — you really do believe it works the way you expected. But it is intellectually dishonest: intellectual honesty requires bending-over-backwards to provide any evidence that you might be wrong, *even if you're convinced that you are right.*

This is an impractical standard to apply to everyday life. A prospective employer asks you in a job interview if you can get to work on time. You say "Yes", not "I think so, but one time in 2003 the power went out and so my alarm didn't go off and I overslept". I don't think anyone considers this dishonesty; indeed, if you were intellectually honest all the time people would think you were pretty weird.

Science has a higher standard. It's not just between you and your employer, it's a claim to posterity. And you might be wrong, but what if you're not around for posterity to call you up and ask you to show your work? That's why intellectual honesty requires you show your work in advance, so that others can see if you're missing something.

You should follow me on twitter here.

December 14, 2011